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ABSTRACT

This digest describes the challenges of social skills instruction and provides three strategies for improving the social competence of all students, including children with disabilities. It begins by emphasizing the importance of teaching individual social skills within the context of establishing a school-wide culture of social competence. To establish a school climate acceptable to all, schools are urged to form a team representing all members of the school community to define school-wide behavioral expectations. Expectations should address the most frequently observed problem behaviors across all school settings, be condensed into three to five short and easy to remember statements, be age appropriate, and be positively stated. The second strategy for improving social competence is to provide students with social skills lessons targeting key behaviors in specific situations. The role of the teacher in requiring appropriate classroom behavior is discussed. The third strategy for improving social competence of all children is to match the level and intensity of instruction to students' needs. Functional behavioral assessment is recommended for identifying events and conditions triggering specific behaviors and the functions maintaining the behavior. Teachers are urged to use this information in designing and implementing individual behavior support plans. (Contains 12 references.) (CR)

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Developing Social Competence for All Students

Claudia G. Vincent, Robert H. Horner, and George Sugai

Schools are under pressure to create safe, orderly and effective learning environments where students acquire social as well as academic skills that will allow them to succeed in school and beyond. This pressure has emerged from real disciplinary challenges combined with wariness of school violence sensationalized in the media (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Sugai et al., 2000; Walker, Nishioka, Zeller, Bullis, & Sprague, 2001; Walker & Shinn, 2002). At the same time, teachers, parents, and administrators report more and more time consumed by disciplinary measures intended to correct students' antisocial behaviors (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Traditional punishment and exclusion may provide a short-lived reprieve from disciplinary problems, but research has shown that in the long term, punishment and exclusion are ineffective and can lead to renewed incidents of disruption and escalating behaviors (Mayer, 1999).

Over the last two decades, school populations have become increasingly diverse. Children sharing the same classroom come from a broad range of cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds. Schools face the challenge of creating environments that are sensitive to a myriad of individual backgrounds and support all students' social and academic success. They can no longer afford to focus exclusively on delivering academic curricula; they are also responsible for establishing and maintaining socio-cultural microcosms that teach children to negotiate the diverse values and social norms of a pluralistic society. This digest describes the challenges of social skills instruction and provides three strategies to improve all students' social competence. Social skills are crucial for mutually productive interactions and durable interpersonal relationships. Children benefit not only socially, but also academically, when appropriate behaviors increase their access to instructional time. We emphasize the importance of teaching individual social skills within the context of establishing a school-wide culture of social competence.

The success of teachers and administrators in helping students develop social competence depends on their ability to (a) develop a school-wide culture of social competence, (b) infuse the curriculum with situation-specific social skills lessons that target key behaviors, and (c) match the level and intensity of instruction to students' social skills deficits (Gresham, 1998; Sugai & Lewis, in press).

Developing a School-wide Culture of Social Competence

Schools are complex environments comprising heterogeneous populations and activities. Students, teachers, staff, administrators, and parents often have differing expectations of how a school should function. To establish a school climate acceptable to all, a team representing all members of the school community should be formed and asked to define school-wide behavioral expectations (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). School-wide behavioral expectations typically (a) address the most frequently observed problem behaviors across all school settings, (b) are condensed into three to five short and easy to remember statements, (c) are age appropriate, and (d) are positively stated (e.g., "be respectful" instead of "don't tease") (Sugai & Lewis, in press). Visibly posted throughout the building, school-wide behavioral expectations are intended to publicize the social values shared by all members of the school community and the behaviors representing those values. For instance, a middle school in Oregon developed the following school-wide behavioral expectations: (1) Be Respectful, (2) Be Responsible, (3) Follow Directions, (4) Hands and Feet to Self, and (5) Be There-Be Ready (Taylor-Greene et al., 1997).

Formulating and posting school-wide behavioral expectations alone does not automatically result in improved student behavior. All students need to be taught directly and actively how to perform the behaviors representing the school's social values (Horner, Sugai, Lewis-Palmer & Todd, 2001, Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Sugai & Lewis, in press). A one-day training could be conducted at the beginning of the academic year or at intervals throughout the year to illustrate the school's behavioral expectations through concrete examples in various school settings (Taylor-Greene et al., 1997). For instance, being respectful can mean waiting one's turn in line in the cafeteria or raising one's hand to get the teacher's attention in the classroom.

To encourage students to practice the taught behaviors, students' performance of appropriate behaviors should be reinforced through routine acknowledgments and monitored through ongoing data collection (Taylor-Greene et al., 1997). In comparison to students who receive teacher attention only in the form of reprimands for rule violations, students who know that their socially appropriate behaviors are appreciated by teachers and staff are more likely to repeat those behaviors and encourage their peers to behave appropriately (Sugai & Lewis, in press). Once a behavioral skill becomes functional for a student (i.e., is positively recognized by teachers and peers) the skill is likely to become part of the student's general behavioral repertoire.

Social Skills Lessons Targeting Key Behaviors in Specific Situations

To support the development of a school-wide culture of competence, social skills instruction must be an integral part of the school's curriculum and daily operations (Sugai & Lewis, in press). During any given school day, students encounter a variety of settings, for example, the school bus, hallway, classroom, cafe-

teria, playground, and gym. Each setting requires specific skills for successful interactions with others sharing the same space.

With mounting pressure to improve students' academic achievements, classrooms have become the focal point for improving student behavior through social skills instruction, thereby ensuring students' access to academic content (Sugai & Lewis, in press). To create a classroom environment where all students can learn, teachers must teach appropriate social skills giving students access to the academic curriculum. Appropriate behaviors, such as raising one's hand to signal for help or sitting still during seatwork help to ensure access to the academic content being delivered. Once students acquire the skills necessary for successful classroom interactions, they will be more likely to generalize their acquired skills to other settings and contribute to the school-wide culture of social competence (Horner et al., 2001; Sugai & Lewis, in press).

Teachers need to respond to a student's inability to perform a social skill exactly as they would to a student's inability to complete an academic task. If students do not know how to solicit teacher attention appropriately, they need to be actively and systematically instructed to signal for help, for example, by raising their hands. Situation-specific social skills instruction should focus on teaching behaviors perceived as functional by students and others with whom they interact. For instance, getting teacher attention must result from raising one's hand, and talking out or leaving one's seat must not result in getting teacher attention. If an inappropriate behavior is made functional for a student by evoking the desired response, teachers inadvertently might encourage the performance of inappropriate behavior. Socially appropriate behaviors in the classroom are likely to decrease the amount of time spent on disciplinary actions and increase students' access to academic content. Situation specific instruction should incorporate a model or description of the appropriate skill, provide students the opportunity to observe and practice the skill, assess the students' ability to perform the skill, provide reinforcement contingent on performing the taught skill, and avoid reinforcing inappropriate behavior (Gresham, 1998; Sugai & Lewis, in press).

Matching the Level and Intensity of Instruction to Students' Needs

Children enter school with varying degrees of social competence. While some students are fluent in social skills and therefore able to interact appropriately with peers and teachers, others might not have learned to perform socially appropriate behaviors and, therefore, are at risk of low academic achievement and developing antisocial lifestyles (Walker et al., 1996). Although variation exists, general research has shown that approximately 80% of a school's student population responds to instruction in school-wide behavioral expectations, and approximately 15% of students need additional instruction in the form of targeted situation-specific lessons. Students who are unresponsive to school-wide and targeted instructions comprise about 5% of a school's population and present the toughest challenge to the daily operations of a school (Horner and Sugai, 2002; Sugai et al., 2000; Walker et al., 1996). Addressing individual students' persistent antisocial behaviors requires a systematic process of determining why a student repeatedly performs the specific behaviors (Sugai et al., 2000).

Functional behavioral assessment offers strategies to identify events and conditions triggering a specific behavior and the functions maintaining the behavior (i.e., get/access or escape/avoid). Direct observations, review of archival data, or interviews with students, their teachers, and/or their parents help to define the circumstances under which the problem behavior occurs. Based on this information, individual behavior support plans focusing on teaching and reinforcing socially appropriate replacement behaviors can be designed and implemented to match individual students' skill deficits (Sugai et al., 2000). To use the technology of functional behavioral assessment effectively and efficiently, schools need to focus on training personnel to conduct functional behavioral assessments and implement the resulting individual behavior support plans.

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